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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

HOME: A Rediscovery of Cuba

by

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Date: January 13, 2000

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
TRAVELER	2
FIVE WAYS OF LOOKING AT HER.....	4
A2590 & BOATS WITHOUT ENGINES	5
CONTRADICTION	8
FLYING WITHOUT WINGS.....	11
CONCLUSION.....	12
ILLUSTRATIONS	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	30

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. <i>Traveler</i>	14
2. <i>Five Ways of Looking at Her</i> , exterior side view	15
3. <i>Five Ways of Looking at Her</i> , viewer interaction	16
4. <i>Five Ways of Looking at Her</i> , interior view	17
5. <i>Five Ways of Looking at Her</i> , top view	18
6. <i>A2590</i>	19
7. <i>A2590</i> , detail	20
8. <i>A2590</i> , interior view	21
9. <i>Boats Without Engines</i>	22
10. <i>Boats Without Engines</i> , interior view	23
11. <i>Contra-diction</i> , three quarter view	24
12. <i>Contra-diction</i> , “This revolution is as green as our palms”	25
13. <i>Contra-diction</i> , “This revolution is as red as our blood”	26
14. <i>Contra-diction</i> as a reliquary	27
15. <i>Flying Without Wings</i>	28
16. <i>Flying Without Wings</i> , detail view.....	29

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my experience at the Rochester Institute of Technology I found myself preoccupied with one thought: home. The primary driving force responsible for my thinking was the distance between Rochester, New York and Houston, Texas. Houston had been my home for the previous twelve years. Everything in Rochester was new to me including the cold climate, the people, and the social environment of the Northern United States. Being away from family was also new to me. Confronted with unfamiliar conditions, I tend to look into what I think I know best- myself. Self-exploration in the context of home sparked memories of my childhood in a place closer to my heart than Houston can ever be. This place is Cuba.

The second factor leading to my thesis work was The School for American Crafts. Although RIT was a great technical experience, the newly acquired woodworking and metalworking skills seemed secondary to the conceptually rich environment in my graduate program. During my second quarter at RIT, I began to enjoy wonderful intellectual conversations with friends and classmates such as Ryutaro Furuhashi, Marylyn Feinberg, and professors Leonard Urso, Mark Stanitz, and Thomas Lightfoot. With such a hotbed of intellectual activity my thoughts materialized into the body of work that became my thesis. By the last quarter I could not turn my ideas into pieces fast enough.

Hence, my thesis is an exploration of Cuban related concerns. Much of what I know about Cuba comes from my childhood memories. Thoughts about my homeland are intertwined and inseparable from personal experiences. I used these personal bits and

pieces as tools to conceive a body of work which everyone could identify with, for it arose out of universal characteristics of the human condition: family, society, politics. I wanted to show more than just a Cuba seen through the nostalgic eyes of a boy and through memories of a distant childhood. The current political situation in Cuba elicited commentary. As a socially conscious artist I wanted to provide the public with a metaphoric picture of today's Cuba.

TRAVELER

The first piece, *Traveler*, (Fig. 1) was the least successful, but it sparked the rest of the series. A longing for my grandmother, America Bencomo, inspired this sculpture. Many of my childhood hours were spent watching my grandmother sew under the glow of a dim light bulb. This was not an unusual event in the average household. Clothing was scarce and most women tackled the task of making garments for their families.¹ The sewing machine, so central to *Traveler*, became a symbolic metaphor for my grandmother's soul.

The bars surrounding the sewing machine resemble a cage and make a political statement. Cubans have for years suffered from lack of freedom. Telephone conversations between Cubans and their family members abroad, for example, are always in code for fear that the calls might be censored. I remember one specific telephone conversation with my grandmother when I asked her about her sister Soila. Soila was a

¹ Moreira, America, Interview by author, June, 1994, Houston, Texas.

devout counter-revolutionary, the word of choice used by communist officials to label citizens who wanted change.² To tell me that her sister was politically active she replied by saying “Soila is not feeling very well. Nothing serious, you know the way she gets crazy sometimes.” My grandmother’s soul lived trapped on that island for half of her life. Another symbol I used to reinforce this notion was the mahogany and rose thorn handle on top of the cage. The handle, suggestive of luggage, could not be held without pain. Traveling abroad for the average Cuban citizen is almost impossible, not necessarily because it is cost prohibitive but because the government does not allow it. When our family decided to move to Spain in 1977 my father was interrogated as if he were a criminal. The required paperwork changed from month to month and my father could hardly keep up with it. Three years later, in 1980, permission was finally granted. Some families have waited for their visas for over twenty years.³ My grandmother intended to see us on a regular basis but during our fifteen-year separation she was issued only two visas.

The mahogany plank that the sewing machine sits on was intentionally beautifully finished. I wanted to place my grandmother on a pedestal. I worked long hours on the plank’s luster and almost reached a state of meditation. Childhood memories began to pave the way for the other pieces.

² U.S. Department of State, Cuba Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 26, 1999.

³ Perez, Gonzalo, Interview by author, July, 1994, Houston, Texas.

FIVE WAYS OF LOOKING AT HER

The largest sculpture by far, *Five Ways of Looking at Her*, picks up where *Traveler* leaves off by elaborating on its social and political commentary. I wanted to build something with a similar message to *Traveler* but with more impact. *Five Ways of Looking at Her* measures one hundred-six inches long, fifty-four inches wide, and thirty-two inches high. Having a large piece in a relatively small area serves the purpose of demanding the gallery's space and intruding into the viewer's walking zone (Fig. 2). Hence, my first effort at making something with which the viewers had to interact. The general public is often misinformed by choice. Problems are easier to ignore when they can be easily overlooked. *Five Ways of Looking at Her* is too large to ignore, as is the problem of Cuba's repressive state. In order to enhance viewer interaction, the windows at each extremity of *Five Ways of Looking at Her* were not placed at eye level. The average person has to bend down in order to see what is at the core of this sculpture (Fig. 3). Once emphasis shifts to the interior of the piece, a nostalgic story unfolds.

Distance between my grandmother and I forced by Cuba's political situation is one of the piece's main themes. At the heart of the large structure rests a sewing machine (Fig. 4). A barrier of space between the machine and the pieces of glass, through which one must view it, conveys the separateness felt when families are divided by distance. Additionally, aged copies of my grandmother's letters written to me over the many years of separation line the interior walls of the cross' arms, or viewing boxes. These letters are full of advice, concerns, news, and stories. They are evidence of the ninety miles of water, which separate her land from my adopted land.

Unlike the machine in *Traveler*, the one here is rusty and obviously old in order to hint at the passage of time. Every year that my grandmother and I were apart she aged. Sensing that she would die soon, I constructed the cross to resemble a coffin (Fig. 5). The fine exterior surfaces on the wooden sections that make up the cross are consistent with the finish of wooden coffins. The height of the piece is also intentionally coffin-like. The idea of looking into a box to see a beautifully old, still carcass is not far from the usual practice at a funeral. This piece was a way of regrettably saying goodbye to a wonderful part of my family, to a piece of culture, and to a loved one I could not touch anymore.

A2590 and BOATS WITHOUT ENGINES

The next two pieces rely entirely on public interaction. They are both small boxes designed to be opened. Once open, both reveal personal anecdotes from my childhood. These anecdotes are no more than regrets about the ways I dealt with situations I did not understand. Before my family left Cuba, I found myself rebelling against the people and things I loved. During the years prior to our departure my life was chaos. I often went to sleep with a fear that the revolutionary movement would break in our home and hurt my family the way they had done to many others. Mobs organized by the system, but working under cover as angered citizens, target Cubans labeled as counter-revolutionaries. A desire to live abroad qualifies anyone as such. These mobs commit

atrocities, torture, and publicly humiliate young and old in the name of the revolution.⁴

Rather than cry about all this, I began to destroy what I would miss.

A2590 is about the first object I destroyed. When I was five years old my mother gave me the cactus I had been wanting for months. For the next five years I cared for this cactus as if it were a puppy. I watered it consistently and watched its growth with anticipation. That cactus became a symbol for my mother's love, for she showed me how to love it. A few months before our departure from the country I began the process of systematically starving the cactus and watching it die. Meanwhile I maintained the external calm and composure that as a child I was notorious for. I should have killed my anger instead.

This sculpture employs material contrasts and symbolism in order to expose the above story. The outside of this box is made out of mahogany wood (Fig. 6). The luster on this fine wood is symbolic of my cold composure, as is the monstrance-like object on top of the box. The monstrance, "a vessel in which the consecrated Host is exposed for the adoration of the faithful," was part of my experience as a proper catholic boy.⁵ This little monstrance is technically meticulous (Fig. 7) and it is centered on the piece's vertical axis. Both are signs of an orderly world; the world in which I wanted to live. To enhance my point I made the monstrance and the door's knob out of fine materials such as gold leaf, rubies and gold. To contrast the exterior surface, I used untreated aged barn

⁴ U.S. Department of State, Cuba Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 26, 1999.

⁵ Guralnik, David [Ed.]. Webster's New World Dictionary. (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1984.)

wood to line the inside (Fig. 8). The barn wood is gray, warped, and covered with holes and imperfections. This was Ernesto Perez inside. Resting in the box interior sits a plastic bag filled with dirt. The dirt is a reference to the cactus while the sealed bag containing it is symbolic of its death. The number written on the bag, A2590, is reminiscent of a catalog number. Cataloging is synonymous with systematic procedures. I proceeded to kill one of the things I loved the most by systematic neglect.

Boats Without Engines is the other box containing pieces of a story. My grandfather, Celestino Moreira, was another dear soul I had to leave behind in Cuba. He was a carpenter by profession and for as long as I could remember he would make me little wooden toys. Some of my favorites were the beautifully fashioned wooden boats he would make out of his scraps. I remember them as perfectly finished little things that floated in my bathtub. These were given to me with so much love that I would hold them when I was most scared. When my grandfather gave me what I thought would be the last one, I threw it on the floor with such rage that the boat split in half. My grandfather looked at me silently and slowly walked away. This event burnt a hole in my soul and kept burning until I conceived the idea for this piece.

Boats Without Engines is made out of an old cigar box just like the one that Celestino used to store his important things. Unlike *A2590*, the knob on the door of *Boats Without Engines* is a found object and it shows beautiful signs of age (Fig. 9). When the viewer opens the box s/he finds a shrine of regret. Inside, the wooden toy boat split in half is made out of polished purple-heart wood in order to overstate the preciousness of the toy's symbolic nature. This symbol is displayed behind glass to accentuate the shrine-like feeling. Behind all this lies another piece of glass on which I

etched the apology I always wanted to send to my grandfather, but never had the chance (Fig. 10). The etching states the following written in Spanish:

“He wanted to come, but he could not. If I had spoken a little softer your ears might not have hurt ... If I had not broken my boat you might not have walked away ... If I had told you how much I love you ... If I had not ran out of time ... without so many barriers I might still be a child.”

I chose Spanish because I wanted him to be able to read it if there is a heaven. The boat pieces rattle loose in between the two pieces of glass so that to read my writing one has to constantly position the boat pieces out of the way. Metaphorically speaking, I had to constantly put aside the shame associated with the incident in order to realize how I felt. Furthermore, placing the boat in front of the writing entices the public to handle the entire object rather than just open a door. This piece is by far the most interactive of the entire show.

CONTRA-DICTION

Politics embody *Contra-diction*'s theme. As the title suggests, the piece is about the irrational and inconsistent policies instated by Cuba's Prime Minister, Fidel Castro. When he rose to power in 1959, for example, he claimed that Cuba's revolution was objective and impartial to the Great Powers. During one of his speeches, while addressing a crowd of supporters about an oncoming news conference, he says the following: “[o]n

that day, we are going to give the world an example of what a real democracy is".⁶ That same year during another speech, he rebuffs claims that Cuba is communist by saying: "If they want to call us Communists because we don't persecute Communists, then let them call us Communists. We have proclaimed our respect for all ideas, and he who believes in his ideas does not fear those of others." He added, "Our revolution is a new doctrine which is between the two hegemonies struggling to control the world. Our revolution is completely Cuban".⁷ Years later a reporter asked Fidel when Socialism was proclaimed in Cuba. Fidel replied by stating that "[t]he Socialist policy of our Revolution was announced on April 16, 1961".⁸ This dictator, who changes policy as he sees fit regardless of Cuban's wishes, rules my country.

To make this point, *Contra-diction* comprises two viewing boxes directly opposite to each other (Fig. 11). When one looks into one end one sees a quote from Fidel Castro etched in glass. The quote, "This revolution is as green as our palms," illustrates his position as the leader with a "new doctrine"⁹ (Fig. 12). The viewing box on the opposite side, contains the quote "This revolution is as red as my blood" (Fig. 13). During the Declaration of Havana speech in 1961 he changed his mind and embraced

⁶ Castro, Fidel, speech from the balcony of presidential palace in Havana, Cuba, August 31, 1960. Havana Fiel Network, Havana, Cuba.

⁷ Castro, Fidel, speech before National Medical Association, Cuba, March 17, 1959. Incoming Telegraph Report from Havana, Cuba to U.S. Secretary of State No: 1075, March 17, 1959 3 p.m.

⁸ Castro, Fidel. Interview: "Castro Reviews Germinating Cuban Socialist Party" (1971), Lima Gente, Lima, Peru.

⁹ Perez, Gonzalo, Interview by author, July, 1994, Houston, Texas.

Marxist theories.¹⁰ Behind each one of these glass panels, I placed a one-way piece of glass so that the quotes seem to disappear into an extremely long tunnel. As the words overlap each other they become less legible the further back one looks into the tunnel. Past a few layers of the repeated quotes, the words become a jumbled mess of letters. In 1959 Fidel gave forty-nine public speeches including a five hour long television speech.¹¹ There are only two television channels in Cuba and both aired the speech. Fidel made over two hundred speeches in 1980.¹² Forty years of continuous and repetitive brainwashing speeches eventually sound like a mess of words.

The two frame-like sections outside of *Contra-diction* contain small pieces of my childhood. Family and friends gave these things to me before I left Cuba and they include my baptism book, lucky charms, small toys, and other personal trinkets (Fig. 11, 14). All of these objects are displayed on black velvet in front of glass. I was hoping these displays would allude to reliquaries. Reliquaries hold remains, ruins, or mementos surviving from the past.¹³ I had to place the remains of my childhood outside of the sculpture's political space because I did not want the quotes, representing Cuba's internal turmoil, to overpower the objects representing memories of the place I love.

¹⁰ Perez, Gonzalo, Interview by author, July, 1994, Houston, Texas.

¹¹ University of Texas database service, Latin American Network Information Center, Austin, Texas.

¹² University of Texas database service, Latin American Network Information Center, Austin, Texas.

¹³ Guralnik, David [Ed.]. Webster's New World Dictionary. (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1984.)

FLYING WITHOUT WINGS

Finally, *Flying Without Wings* was conceived to portray the hopelessness of Cuba's youth. The piece is about Cuba's future. Poet Magalys Pino Garcia writes in her poem *WHO SAYS NO?*

“We say that there are many children that enjoy the best beaches in Cuba, have the privilege of having comfortable apparels (sic) and shoes, eat the sweetest tidbits, play with sophisticated toys, and sure enough, the Cuban children do not.”¹⁴

When my sister was ten years old she was sent to a cane field for over six months to cut cane and groom fields. When she returned, her hands were scarred and callused; evidence of hard labor. This was a prerequisite for most children who wanted to continue with their education.¹⁵

Flying without wings resembles a barred window because the children of Cuba see the world outside through bars they might never break (Fig. 15). The planter box below the bars contain rows of dirt reminiscent of sown fields (Fig. 16). These rows represent the hard labor that Cuban children have to endure to succeed. The feathers growing out of the tiny fields give this sculpture the only sense of hope. If out of their hard labor these children cultivate an intellect capable of discerning between mindless community effort and individualism and freedom, then they would have grown the feathers necessary to make wings and fly away.

¹⁴ Pino, Magalys Garcia. “WHO SAYS NO?”, 1998, Agencia Patria, distributed CubaNet

¹⁵ Moreira, America, Interview by author, June, 1994, Houston, Texas.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps ego, avarice, or evil is to blame for Fidel Castro's intolerance. The idea of a government for the people finds no refuge in a country which, in spite of its claims, still harbors a class oriented society where government officials are privileged and the rest of the country suffers the inadequacies of a poor standard of living. To be poor is one thing, but to lack the freedom to tell the rest of the world about your poverty is inhumane.

Systematic and constant deprivation of basic rights has lead many families to the brink of despair. For example, the Human Rights Watch reported that on June 30, 1998 Havana police arrested Reiner Marrero Toledo on a charge of accessory to illegal sacrifice of livestock. On July 9, 1998 the authorities told his family that he had committed suicide by hanging himself with a sheet. However, a family member who viewed the body noted heavy bruising, raising questions about the police account of Marrero's death.¹⁶ Many have left their loved ones behind in hopes they might reunite later. Some have tried to find "home" elsewhere only to discover a need to return to the motherland. In 1980 my immediate family left Cuba out of despair. I left behind everything I knew and loved. In 1989 my grandfather died; I saw him last before I left Cuba. My grandmother died in 1996. Home is immaterial to me. It is not a place or a country anymore and exists only in memories of a childhood intact with the presence of a loving family. This thesis explores

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, Cuba Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998, Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 26, 1999.

the political and social facets of a Cuban-American trying to rediscover the meaning of “home.”

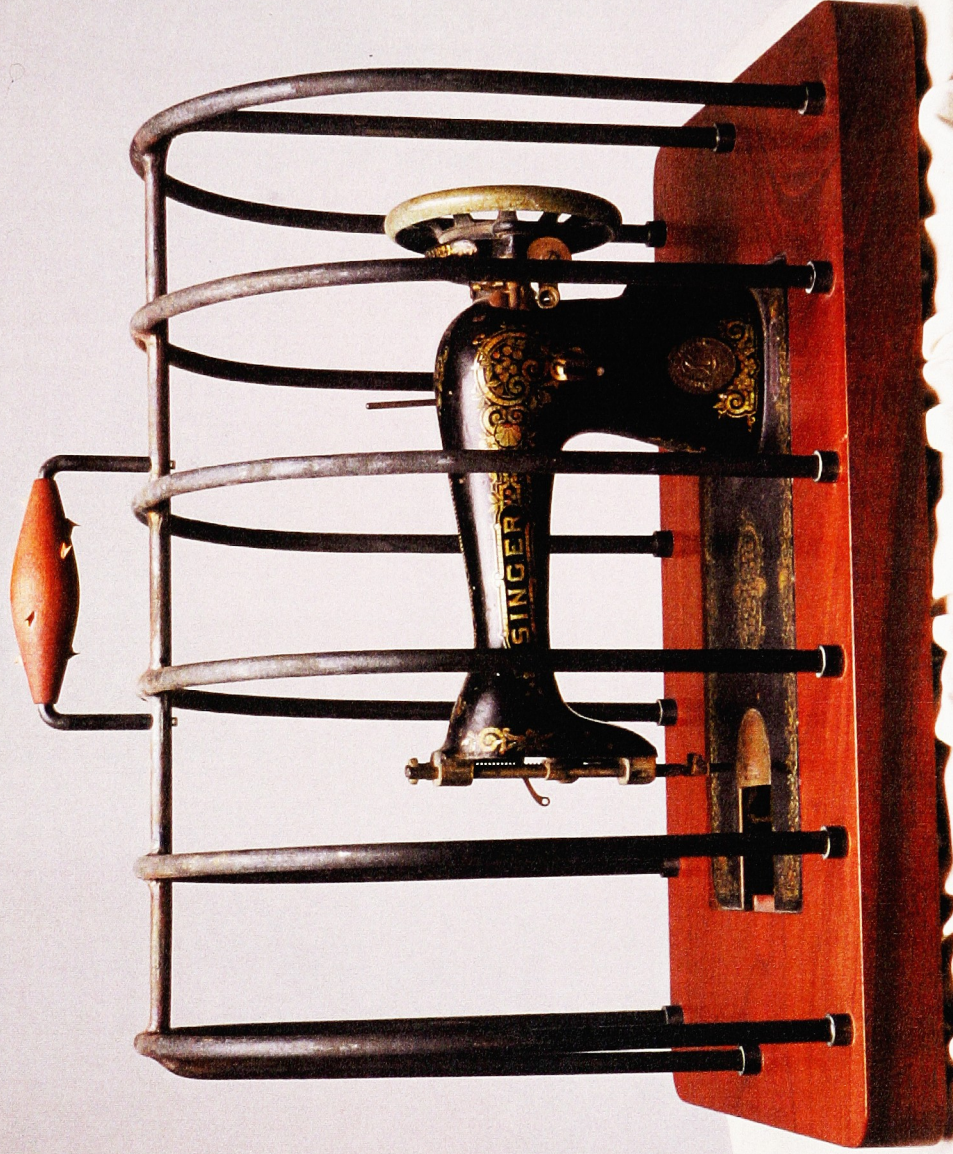


Figure 1.
Traveler
Wood, steel, glass, and found object
24" x 14" x 17"



Figure 2.
Five Ways of Looking at Her, exterior side view
wood, steel, glass, and found object
105.5" x 32.5" x 54"



Figure 3.
Five Ways of Looking at Her, viewer interaction



Figure 4.
Five Ways of Looking at Her, interior view

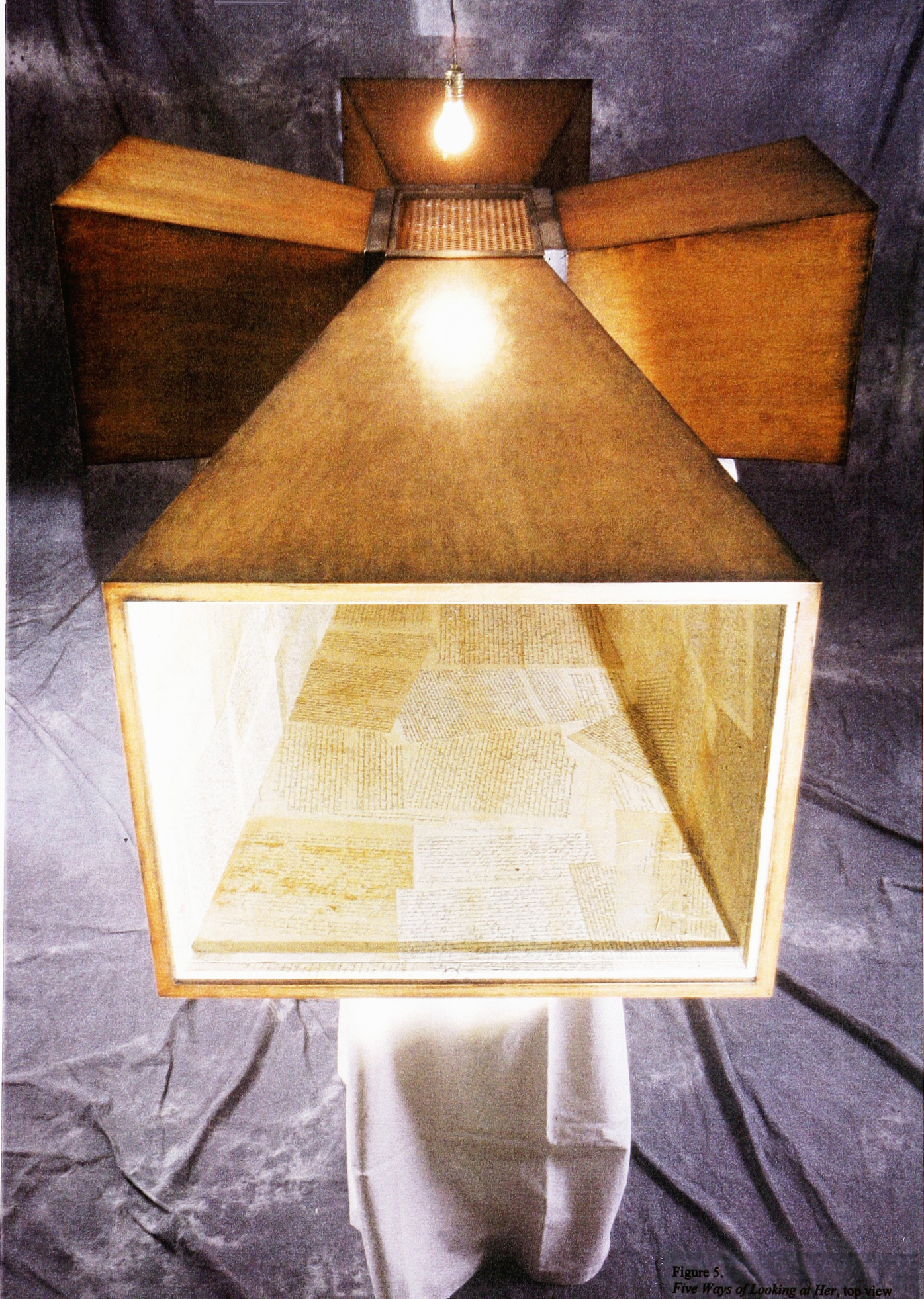


Figure 5.
Five Ways of Looking at Her, top view



Figure 6.
42590
Wood, gold leafed copper, copper, gold, rubies, dirt
20.5" x 5" x 5"

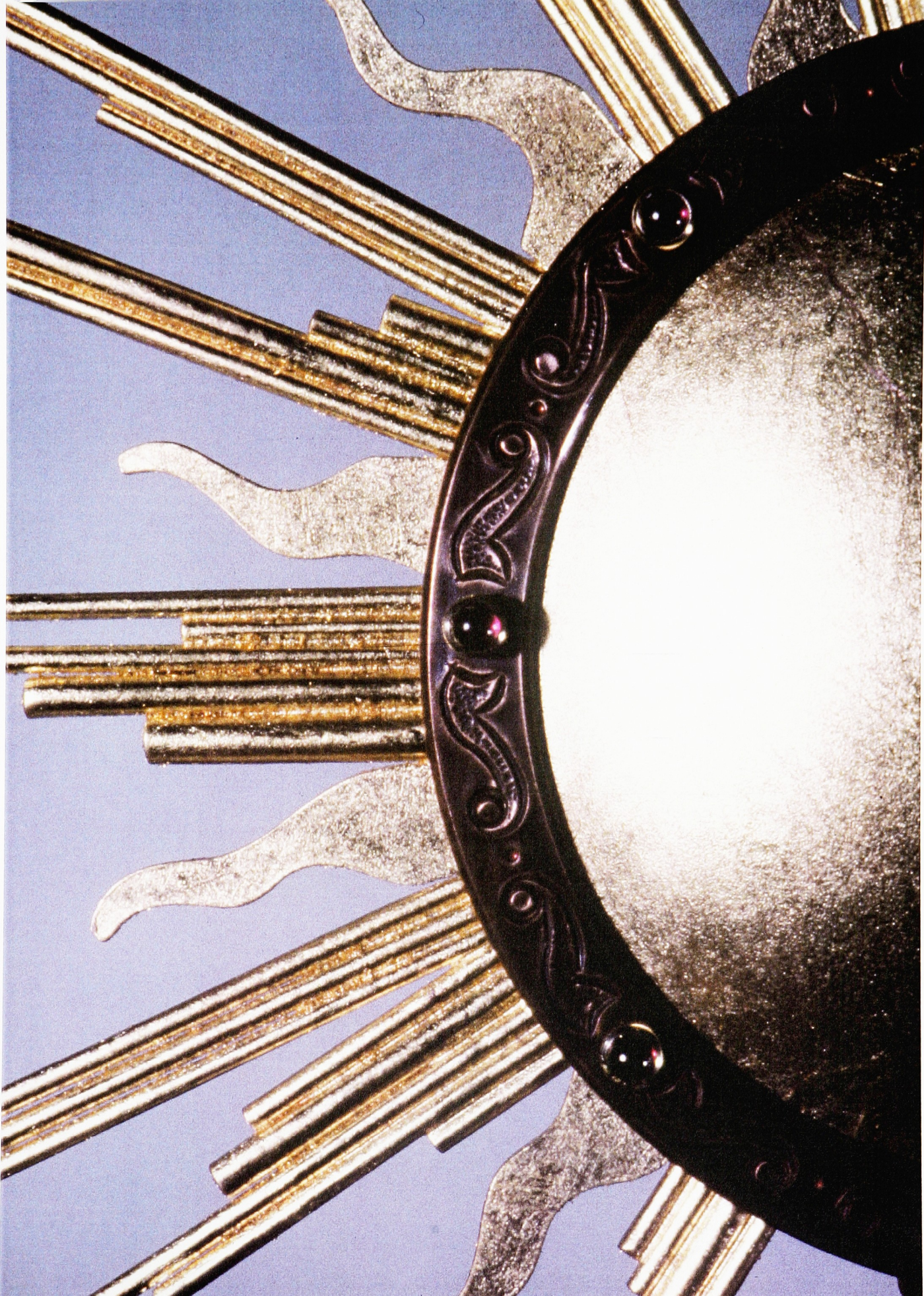


Figure 7.
A2590, detail

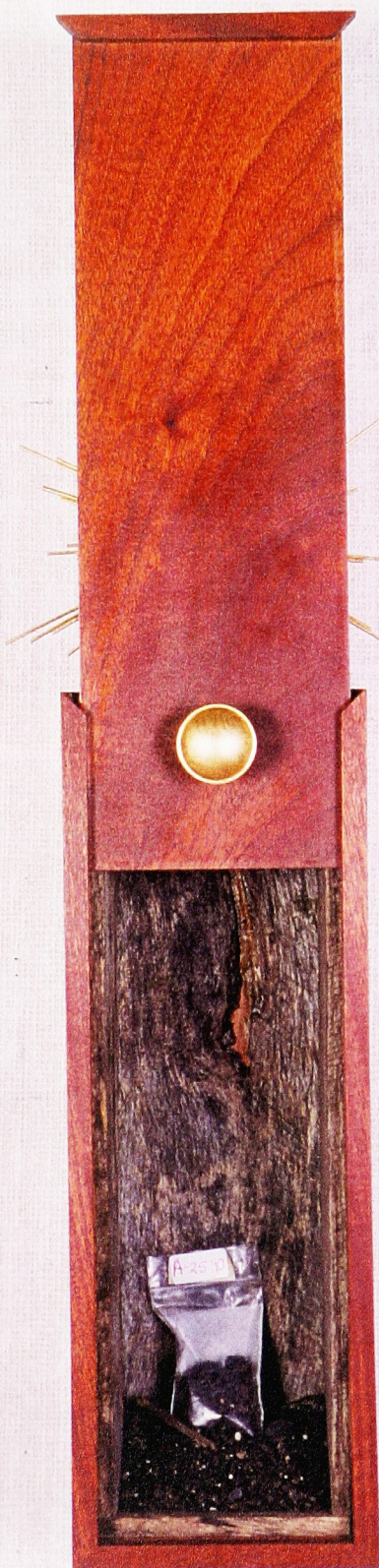


Figure 8.
A2590, interior view



Figure 9.
Boats Without Engines
Wood, glass, gold plated wood, found object
2.25" x 6 x 5



Figure 10.
Boats Without Engines, interior view



Figure 11.
Contra-diction, three quarter view
Wood, steel, glass, personal objects
4'6" x 12" x 36"



Figure 12.
Contra-diction, "This revolution is as green as our palms"



Figure 13.
Contra-diction, "This revolution is as red as out blood"

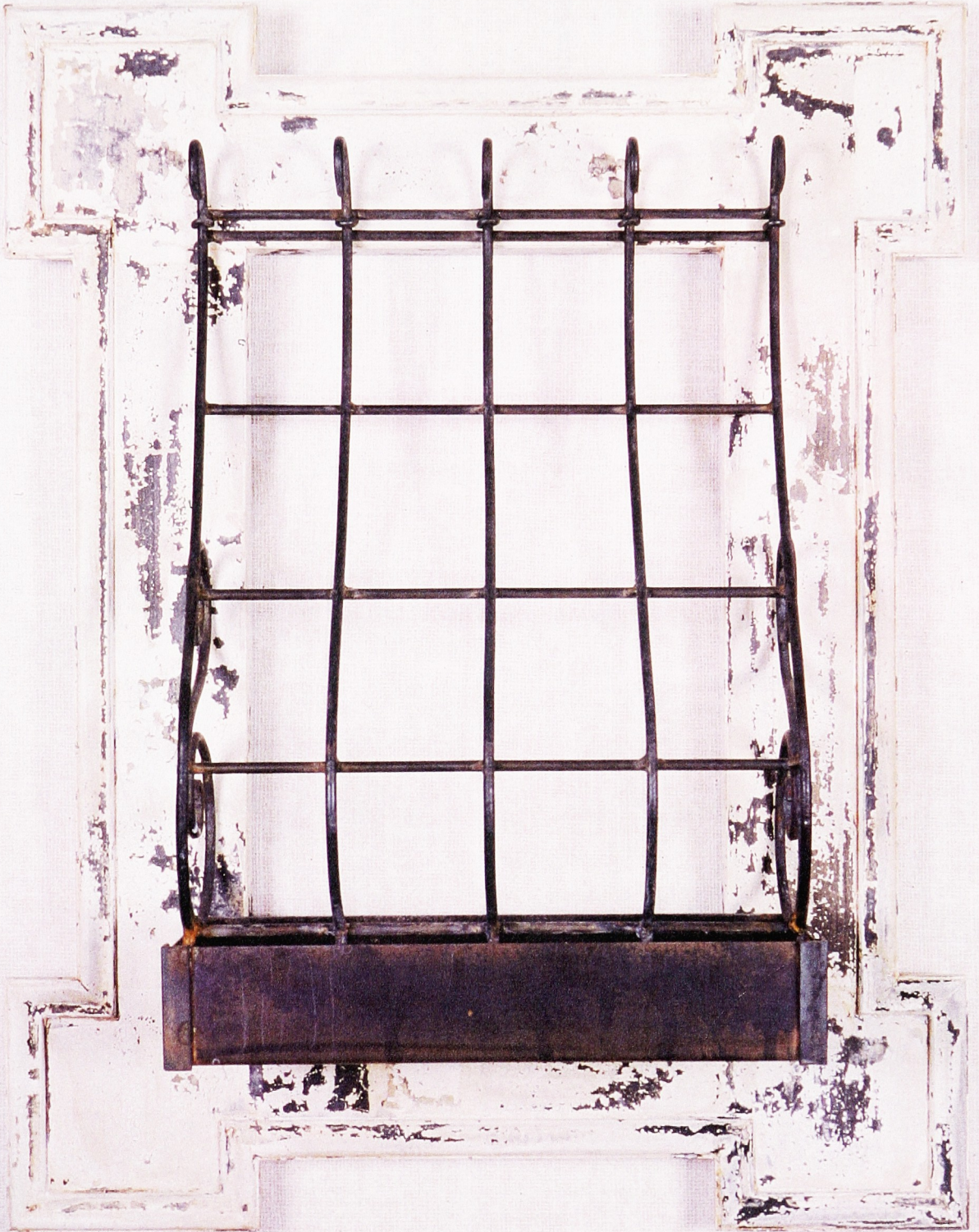


Figure 15.
Flying Without Wings
Wood, steel, dirt, feathers
34" x 27" x 9"

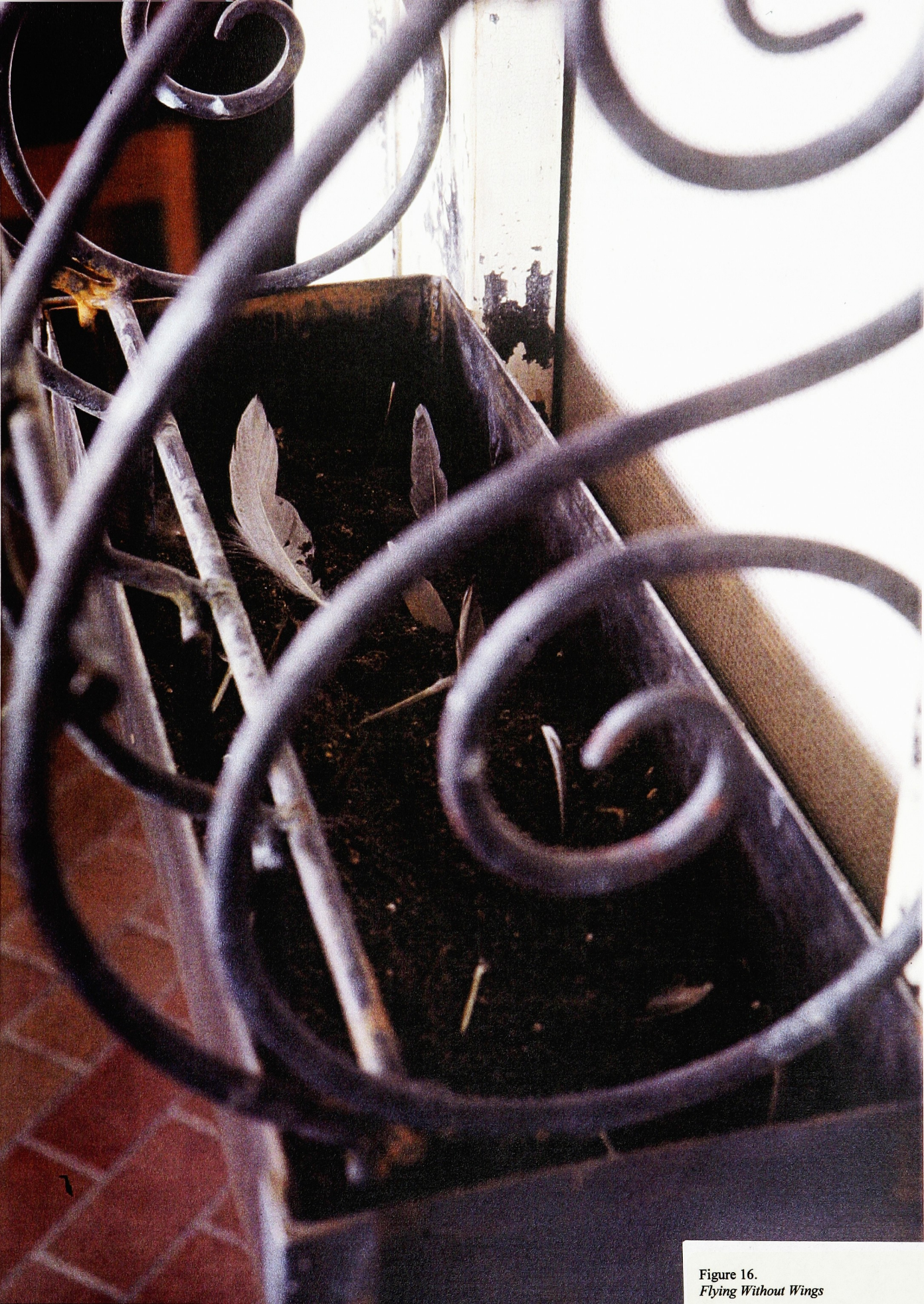


Figure 16.
Flying Without Wings

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